

The Five Times Nancy Wheeler Wanted to Say "I Love You" and the One Time She Did. by aidhanturner

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"-idiot, Steve Harrington."

"And dammit, you're still beautiful, Nancy Wheeler."

The Five Times Nancy Wheeler Wanted to Say "I Love You" and the One Time She Did.

I. The first time is a shock.

"Then tell me!

"Tell you what?"

"You love me!"

This is the first time her 'I love you' has hitched in her throat, stuck in there like a stubborn lump that she can't cough out. He can see it, she knows he can see it, and the sudden realization that bleeds across his features is enough to rip the rapid beating heart in her chest in half. She swears she can hear it in that moment, over the sound of the hammering in her ears, the deafening tear of throbbing tissue vibrating throughout her rib cage. She was stunned, taken aback, speechless in that very moment. What *had* happened last night? All she could remember was arriving to the party, one she truly didn't want to be at, but one she was at nonetheless. But everything after that... was simply gone, aside from one word. *Bullshit*. It resonated in her mind like a bad dream that made her temples ache. She knew she had a bad feeling about it when she woke up that morning, like an acrid aftertaste left to linger, and now things were falling into place, albeit not in her favor.

She'd said it, 'i love you', a hundred, maybe even thousands of times before, so why was it so difficult for her now? *You don't love me?* Steve's words from the night before resurface and her world comes plummeting down. Her gaze fell from Steve's down to the multi-colored gravel at their feet as she recalls what she said next. *It's bullshit*. She can feel the blood drain from her face. *But was it?* She asks herself, words continuing to evade her, and the muteness they're bathing in was more deafening than the shriek of her heart telling her *it wasn't*. The sigh she elicits from him makes her jaw tense. It hurt her to see him like this, so why couldn't she just give him what he wanted? He's walking away before she can find her voice again.

"Steve-"

A wave of his hand cuts her off as he's already making his way around the corner. The aching organ in her chest is screaming for her to stop him, grab him by the hand, tell him she loves him, but her feet never move.

Was this the way their story was supposed to end? A fight in a small alleyway, over a night she could barely even remember? The pain in her chest was magnificent, beautiful, even. Cruel. Silent tears began to well up, blurring her vision as she stared at the red brick before her, desperately struggling to make sense of the mess between her brain and her heart.

II. The second time wasn't easy.

It had been two weeks since they broke up. Two weeks and four hours. Two weeks, four hours, and fifteen minutes to be more precise, not that Nancy Wheeler was keeping track. Not entirely, at least, she thought to herself as she watched the cat shaped clock on the wall tick on and on, each pendulum swing saving away another second that's passed. There were a lot of things on her mind those days, not just Steve, but in her solitude, she found the root of her rot. What had destroyed her, and in hand, what had destroyed Steve. They wanted two different things, and maybe in another universe, their timing could have been perfect, but they weren't in those other universes. They were there, now, and she wounded him in the process of her own hurting.

All her life, Nancy had wanted to lead a normal teenage life, where blackouts and drunken mistakes were the most of her qualms, but that isn't what life had in the cards for her. That was taken from her the second Barb vanished, she knew that, accepted it, but Steve didn't sign up for it, and she shouldn't have expected him to. He was a teenage boy in his last year of high school - a bit of normalcy shouldn't be too much to ask for, but Nancy can't sacrifice her justice for Barb for it. She wouldn't be able to live with herself if she did.

These facts aside, it didn't make this moment any less bitter.

Because there she was with Steve's grey hoodie hugged against her chest as she inhaled his scent, letting it flood her nostrils. She'd packed it all up. All of his belongings in a cardboard box that

included his favorite sunglasses she'd stolen, a mixtape that consisted of way too many Boston and Wham! tunes, notes and silly doodles he'd pass to her in the hallways on the way to chemistry, and a necklace he'd gotten her for her birthday earlier that year. It didn't feel right, keeping the necklace, however much she'd loved it, however much her bare neck now made her stomach churn.

"Nance, Steve's here..."

Her mother's voice looms outside of her door, soft and cautious, still startling her. She'd known about their breakup for a week or so. Nancy figured she'd caught on when she caught her crying herself to sleep, but she didn't care to answer the questions that came after. She'd be fine, she told herself. She had to be.

"Coming," she croaks, shoving the sweater into the box.

He's standing in the driveway, waiting for her with her own box she knew awaited her. A familiar dry lump forms in the back of her throat as she swallows thickly and attempts to smile despite every muscle in her body begging her not to, as if a smile in that moment were a cardinal sin.

"I think I've got everything," she says, her voice unsurprisingly brittle as she places his box on the crimson paint of his hood.

It's been awhile, is what she wants to say.

"Yeah, me too," his statement is terse and she knows she deserves it. They stand there, frozen in a few silent ticks.

"Right, well," her mouth is dry as she grabs her belongings out of his hand. "Thanks for bringing this by."

I've missed you, she swallows the words down alongside her regret, hoping the acid in her stomach disintegrates it. This permits a meek chuckle from him as he's gazing down at her. She has to look away. The miserable sigh she hears next breaks her heart all over again.

"Goodbye, Nance," he leans down to press a tender kiss on her forehead. She closes her eyes in response and lets him, breathing him in one last time as her brows knit together. Here comes the pain

again - it's almost like it never left. And too soon, he's pulling away and heading back into his car. Her eyelids flutter open as she watches him open his door.

"Goodbye, Steve," is all she can say, although she's not even entirely sure he can hear her.

I love you, she bites her tongue this time and welcomes the mouthful of copper in response as he backs out of her driveway.

III. The third time was a cruel joke.

"I may be a shitty boyfriend, but it turns out I'm a pretty kick ass baby sitter," he's joking around with her now. Enough time had passed to where they could finally talk to each other again, and for that, she was thankful. But his words sting more than she can let on.

"Steve-" she starts, her hues narrowing, a disconcerting frown tugging down the edges of her lips.

"It's okay, Nance. It's okay."

He's quick to cut her off, accepting of their fate before he's walking away from her again - she should be used to this same old song and dance, but she isn't - it hasn't gotten easier yet, and, shamefully, she can't decide what she hates more. The thought that he's finally moving on or that he actually thought of himself as a 'shitty boyfriend.' The latter should be a crime, she thought, her mind flashing back to recollections of Steve bringing her to Barb's parents' house for dinner every week or his good morning kisses he'd give her as she climbed into his car for their early morning drives to school. There were little things, there were big things, but there were seldom any bad ones.

Besides, what was okay about any of this? What about her hurting him was okay? Or her non-existent "feelings for Jonathan" that everyone seemed so hellbent on proving? He might be okay with it now, but she wasn't, could never be. What was so okay about the possibility that they might not make it back tonight while she no longer had the right to say what she truly wanted to say? Nancy Wheeler had made her bed all those weeks ago, but she couldn't

bring herself to lie in it.

She tips her head back and laughs ruefully at the night sky when she thinks no one is looking.

IV. The fourth time wasn't the right time.

A bit of normalcy began to resolve upon the small town of Hawkins, Indiana, a foreign and peculiar feeling for Nancy Wheeler, but welcomed nevertheless.

The Hawkins Lab was exposed, the gate was closed, and all seemed to be well as Hawkins Middle School's annual Snowball was coming to an end.

"See you later, Nancy," Jonathan calls out from across the gymnasium where he waves at her alongside Will.

"See ya!" she calls back, beaming with delight as she waves them goodbye before she goes back to tidying up the drink station for the last time that night. The dance was a triumph to say the least, seeing as how no children were kidnapped or stowed away to another dimension. Nancy supposed she could get used to the humdrum routine of mundane life once again.

"Thanks again for the dance, Nancy," Dustin's familiar voice startles her from behind, manufacturing a small exclamation from her end.

Swiping the last of the punch cups into the trash can, Nancy dusts her hands off, turning around and grinning down at Steve Harrington's mini me for the night.

"Anytime, Dustin," she assures him with a squeeze of his shoulder. "Did you have a good time?"

"Oh yeah, definitely, girls are going to be talking about this for weeks!"

This makes her clap her hands together and laugh. It made her happy to see him like this. He was a good kid with a heart of gold, and one day those girls would realize that. She wasn't lying when she told him that he was her favorite.

“Well, I’m just about done here, come on, you’ve got a ride?”

Her fingers stretch for her coat underneath the table before she’s slipping it on and walking across the memorable hardwood floors of the gym with Dustin.

“Yeah, he’s probably waiting for me now, I told him 11 pm sharp.”

“Oh yeah?” she asks as she’s pushing open the doors, letting the crisp winter breeze nip at her nose.

“Yeah, there he is! Steve!”

She catches sight of him before he sees her and she can feel her heart begin to flurry in a hectic frenzy within the walls of her chest before they finally lock eyes. She didn’t know who she was expecting, but it certainly wasn’t him, and yet, there he was, Steve Harrington, perched at the bottom of the steps, waiting amongst the chilly night air as the last car, aside from his own and a faculty member’s or two, was leaving the school parking lot. He shoots her a soft, knowing smile before briefly reaching down to ruffle Dustin’s hair.

“Dusty, my man! How was it?”

“Only the best Snowball ever!”

“Dance with any lovely ladies tonight?”

“You could say that,” Dustin’s wide, toothy grin is contagious as he glimpses over at Nancy and Steve’s glance is quick to follow.

“It was my pleasure” she replies with a small curtsy. She’s not sure if the blood quickening to her face is from the cold or something else entirely, but she can feel her cheeks flush as Steve gives her a nod of approval before he high fives Dustin.

“Dustin, why don’t you go wait in the car, I’ll be there in a minute,” Steve eventually says to Dustin, and not long after, Nancy’s walking down the stairs to stand next to him as they watch Dustin descend to his familiar BMW. “That was awfully nice of you, what you did for Dustin. He was really nervous about tonight.”

A crooked smile forms at the edges of her lips as she peers up at him from the corner of her eyes. "I was happy to do it, you know how vicious girls at this age can be..."

"Yeah," he laughs, head shaking as his hands rest on his hips. "Any age, really."

Oh, she thinks to herself, brows peaking upwards in mild incredulity as her gaze drops and she's gaping down at her freezing toes. It burned like a papercut - the wound was miniscule, almost non-existent, but the stinging was radiant.

"Kidding," he quickly resolves, nudging at her shoulder assuredly. "I'm kidding, Nance."

"R-right, yeah," still, she didn't know what to say. Maybe she deserved it, maybe she didn't. All she knew was that she wanted to get out of there. Where was her mom, anyway?

"I'm an idiot and that was a bad joke," she finally lifts her head to peer back up at him. His features are crumpled in apologetic self-doubt as she feels him stare down at her. "Go ahead, say it, I know you want to, 'You're an-'"

"-idiot, Steve Harrington." She finishes the sentence for him, bubbly laughter finding them once again and the unease dissipating into the night sky. It felt good to laugh with him again, to hear his own and have it fill the void spaces he'd left inside of her when she let him go. It'd been too long. Much too long.

"And dammit, you're still beautiful, Nancy Wheeler." he takes her off guard once they catch their breath and she's blinking rapidly as her world is flipped upside down in that moment.

What was she supposed to say? She opens her mouth to speak only to immediately close it. He was always good at this, leaving her speechless.

"Steve, I-" *still love you*, is what she almost says as numb fingertips reach for his own, but she never gets the chance to.

"NANCY! Over here!" her mother's voice interjects, forcing both of

their heads to whip forward and spot her mother's chrysler minivan parked right behind Steve's, blinding headlights causing Nancy to squint at the waving figure through the darkened windshield.

"-have to go." she sighs in defeat, hand dwindling back down to her side. When was the world finally going to let her finish her sentence? Maybe this was its way of telling her it still wasn't the right time.

V. The fifth time was a close call.

It'd been a week since the night of the Snowball, and winter break was speedily approaching. That meant that if Nancy were fortunate enough, she'd see Steve in passing, once or twice, maybe at the supermarket or at the theater, but that was the most she could look forward to.

Relax, she tells herself. What's another month going to do?

Nothing, quite possibly. Or maybe everything. With an exasperated groan, Nancy crashes onto her bed and glares at the ceiling as her head bounces off the mattress, arms crossed over her chest while jumbled thoughts somersault across her teenage brain.

Why hadn't she just told him that night? Her mother could have waited and maybe Steve would be curled up next to her in the Wheeler residence that night, helping them put up the christmas tree again, smirking under mistletoe, and laughing about the eggnog mustaches that had formed on their upper lips. Memories of last christmas spent with him nestled up next to the fire and the scent of fresh pine needles clouded her senses, her features melting from exasperation into that of something sullen and reminiscent. Bittersweet.

Maybe she could just... Her head whips around and her gaze narrows in on the telephone at her bedside table. Before she can talk herself out of anything, she's reaching over to pull the phone off its hook and her fingers are dialing without pause, muscle memory recalling each digit with ease.

Ring, ring.

She sits up now, fingers fiddling with the coiled phone cord as she looks out at the night sky, searching for aligning stars but all she's met with is the bleak darkness of it all. Her nerve begins to dwindle.

Ring, ring.

She can feel the doubt begin to seep in. Was this how she really wanted to do this? Over the phone? Didn't Steve deserve better than this?

Ring, ring.

What if Steve simply deserved better than her?

"Hello?" his familiar voice startles her from her thoughts. She opens her mouth to speak, only to shut it once more, lips now thinning into a straight line. She couldn't give him what he wanted when he asked for it, what made her think he'd still want it months later? Too little, too late. "Hellooo?"

Without a second thought, she wordlessly slams the phone back down on the receiver.

VI. The one time she does.

The air was... a bit tense to say the least.

Nancy joined Mike and his friends at Steve's for a holiday get together - much more for the kids than it was for them, but she was more than willing to accompany Mike to Steve's when their parents' look of concern arose. Not that Nancy was concerned. After the events that happened a month ago, she knew that the kids were more than secure in the hands of Steve Harrington, and with his parents, once again, absent, they were probably in for a fun night as well.

Or at least she thought.

It was all fine at first, really. There were laughs amongst the Harrington household, sliding down the bannister when Steve wasn't

looking paired with stolen glimpses in Steve's direction when everyone else wasn't looking. She couldn't help herself and she was smitten to admit that she'd caught him a few times too. It was an airy game of cat and mouse they were playing at. The air around them was toasty and light-hearted, full of mirthful merriment, an amiable variation from their latest encounters. It isn't until Max catches their side-long glances that things begin to go a bit...awry. Nancy can sense the mischief on her features before she even opens her mouth and is quick to excuse herself to the bathroom before anything can unfold.

"The reason Steve doesn't have Nancy anymore is because of Nancy...not Steve," Mike shrugs as Nancy makes her way back down the stairs to rejoin the party.

"I mean shit, talk to Nance about that one!"

"What the hell, Mike! **Steve!**" Her eyes widen in horror as she's walking up behind her little brother, her jaw dropping in disbelief while Steve's slipping behind the kitchen door, gone with the wind, hollering apologies to Nancy about her impending interrogation behind him. Was this how Caesar felt when Brutus stabbed him in the back? She gawks from Mike, to the door Steve disappeared behind, then back to Mike. She had many ideas floating around in her head about how this night might turn out, but being interrogated by children about her love life was not something she could have seen coming.

"Fine," Max says abruptly and Nancy's brows shoot to the sky as the younger red head turns on her heels and zeroes in on her like a wildcat ready to pounce. For a thirteen-year-old girl, she had this intimidation thing nailed down. If Nancy weren't the one on the receiving end of this attack, she'd say she was impressed.

But she was, and so embarrassment washes over Nancy like a violent tidal wave and she can feel the palms of her hands begin to clam up. She opens her mouth only to stutter incoherently.

"I - I - uh think I left something in the kitchen," is all she can finally muster up before she swiftly turns to trail after Steve, fidgety hands balling into fists at her side.

“Yes, I think you said something about pie?” El chimes in, nodding astutely in attempts to save her, Nancy Wheeler, the girl on fire. She’s going to have to remember to buy her some eggos later as a little thank you.

“You’ll regret it, Nancy!” Max calls out after her.

You’ll regret it, the words echo in her mind and she huffs, brows furrowing. What did these kids know of her relationship with Steve, anyway? What did they know of regret? They were kids! She bursts through the kitchen doors with haste, glaring at a wide-eyed Steve now before her fists crash into his arm.

“Hey!” he exclaims, hands reaching up to rub at the point of impact. “What was that for?”

“You know exactly what that was for, Steve Harrington,” she mumbles back tearing her gaze away to focus on anything but him, opting instead to stare vehemently at the tiles that littered the Harrington household countertops, the base of her spine leaned against the fridge while her rapidly beating heart attempted to restart itself. Everything ran through her head in those few silent moments they shared, but the most prominent was the loudest: Max was right.

Of course she wanted to tell Steve how she felt. She’s wanted to since that day in the alleyway. Since that night at Jonathan’s or the night of Snowball, but she kept a hold of it like a secret, like it was her cross to bear until the time was right, and now, under the scrutiny of Hawkins, Indiana’s favorite peanut gallery, it was all threatened to come undone. Was the timing right? She still didn’t know. Maybe it never would be and maybe Max’s interrogation wasn’t such a bad thing after all.

“Steve—“

As if on cue, Max walks through the door and shacks up next to Steve, her cat-like gaze boring fiery holes into Nancy’s stomach. Nancy’s spine straightens in response and her chin is held high. Max’s fight as Steve’s wingman was far from over. It was admirable. Nancy could almost laugh about it. Almost.

"Some people never realize what they have right in front of them," she was turning out to be awfully wise for someone who was Mike's age, Nancy thought to herself, even if she was taking a dig out of her. She was good at it. "And *you*, you left *that*," Max's finger points back to Steve. "For *Jonathan*?" Nancy's gaze darted back and forth from a calm and collected Max to a fidgeting Steve who was trying his best to remain cool given the awkward tension that seemed to bubble up at the sound of Jonathan's name. "This is why I'm a tomboy, girls make no sense."

It's Nancy's turn to shake her head in confusion, a tired laugh escaping her lips. Because she was tired – so tired of the Jonathan debacle, it was beginning to sound like a broken record. If she had a nickel for every time someone assumed she'd left Steve for Jonathan she'd never have to work a day in her life. Bauman, her mother, at first, now Max, and probably the rest of the world alongside Steve. When were they all going to give up this ghost? If she wanted to be with Jonathan, she wouldn't be there.

"I most certainly did *not* leave Steve for Jonathan," her voice cracks on the last syllable as her arms tighten across her chest and she's looking away again to mumble under her breath. "Everyone's... just got it all wrong." Very, very wrong.

"Then my god, what are you waiting for? Sure, he's... fucked up. He's a guy. They all do. But, do you want to end up with someone like Billy?" Max's eyebrows raise this time as the horrid question sinks in, sending shivers running up Nancy's spine. That was a good way of putting things into perspective, she supposed. Nancy would sooner find herself as an old spinster living amongst her twenty cats before she let the likes of Billy Hargrove touch her.

All Nancy can do is scoff, partially at the question, partially at the way Max was still hounding her, her efforts diligent and persevering, Nancy can feel herself being pushed her over the edge, and God only knew Nancy Wheeler was hanging on by a single thread. Spread thin like butter on dry toast. Daring to crumble at the next slightest graze.

"N-no of course I don't want to end up with someone like Billy!" A small part of her wanted to run, dart out the back door and let the wind carry her away along with her feelings for Steve that she knew

she should have let go of months ago. If this was torture for her, she could only imagine how he must be feeling. But there was another part in her, another part that kept her feet planted there, steady and grounded – another part that screamed at her to give in, let go of the weight she'd been holding in her chest. "What do you want me to say, Max? Tell you I love him? Tell him I love him?" She allows herself to glance at him, allows herself to drink him in for the first time and get drunk off of the loveliness of him. Her settled heart begins to flutter once again as her feelings for him topple over inside of her, spill out onto the floor, and oh what a lovely mess it's made. Her voice begins to raise, becomes more brazen, and her hands fly into the air with defeat. "Fine! I love him! Are we happy now? I love Steve!" She swears she's forgotten how to breathe as her lungs gasp for air. "**I... love you,**" her last three, shaky syllables temper with unspoken fondness as she directs them away from Max and to Steve, just loud enough for him to hear.

The rest of the world pauses and falls quiet as she watches Steve's anxious gaze fall from the ceiling back down to her, and she knows he's heard her even as his head is tilting to the side in question.

"No bullshit?" he asks, warranting a soft, yet sad chuckle to escape her lips. That damned word.

"No bullshit, Steve." She swallows thickly when he pushes himself off of the counter, holding her breath as he begins to close the space between the two.

"Yeah, well, I love you, too, Nancy Wheeler. You know that."

They're both smiling now as she closes the last few inches between them. She exhales sharply as her lungs deflate, and tears begin to well up at the corner of her eyes as she hears those words. "I do know, but it's nice to hear you say it again."

She knew - she knew that that alleyway wasn't where their story was supposed to end all those months ago, but what she didn't know was that she'd have Max to thank for it all in the end.